

Ambassador McCormick's Memorial Day Speech
Old St. Paul's
Monday, May 29, 2006

Thank you for those kind and moving words, Rob.

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, welcome to our first
Memorial Day commemoration at Old St. Paul's.

Today, we are here to observe Memorial Day. This is America's Anzac
Day.

Memorial Day is a national holiday in the United States, but it's unique to
us so some of you may not be familiar with it.

Memorial Day, also known as Decoration Day, honors soldiers fallen in
battle. Dating from the Civil War, it is traditionally marked with parades
and memorial services.

That doesn't tell us much, does it?

The first Memorial Day was observed by freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina in 1865. The city's historic race track had been used as a Confederate prison during the war, and was the site of a mass grave for Union soldiers who had died in captivity. On that first commemorative day, thousands of freed slaves and Union soldiers held a parade, followed by patriotic singing and a picnic.

But Waterloo, New York is the official birthplace of what we now know as Memorial Day. The village first observed Decoration Day on May 5, 1866. A well-known citizen of the town, General John Murray, was friends with General John A. Logan, who admired the way the South had special commemoration days for their war dead. This friendship probably led to the observance of Decoration Day nationwide. Two years after Waterloo first celebrated Decoration Day, Logan, as commander-in-chief of a veteran's organization, declared it should be observed throughout the United States. And on May 30, 1868 it was. The tombs of fallen Union soldiers were decorated in remembrance.

After World War II, Decoration Day commonly became known as "Memorial Day," and in 1967 Federal law officially changed the holiday to this name. In 1971, Congress changed Memorial Day from what had been its traditional date – May 30 – to the last Monday in May.

So now know we know *how* we come to be here today.

But *why* are we here, really?

We are here to commemorate the brave men and women who have sacrificed their lives for our freedom. We remember their youth, their optimism, their bravery. We mourn for them. We mourn the lives unlived, the potential unrealized. The families broken. The dreams broken.

And we are here to thank them for all that they did, and the ultimate sacrifice they made, so that we can live in peace and freedom.

And this brings me to why I believe there's another answer as well to the question of why we observe days to honor our fallen soldiers, whether it be Memorial Day or Anzac Day.

To answer this question -

Let's go to the movies.

Those of you who have seen "Saving Private Ryan" will remember the moment when Captain John Miller is mortally wounded after he fulfilled

his mission of bringing the young Private Ryan to safety. He says to the young Private, "Earn this." Years later, Ryan stands at the grave of his captain and tells him he has tried to do as the Captain wished.

He has led a good life.

I believe this is the real message behind Memorial Day.

We are here to honor the fallen by leading good lives in their name. We are here to lead the lives they could not live, and thank them for making this possible for us.

I am not going to tell you or anyone how to lead a good life.

But I will tell you that for me, who has the honor of being an Ambassador of the United States, part of paying that debt is to remember the tremendous partnership our two countries have shared, and to do my part to help deepen that friendship.

And what better symbol of our partnership than in this beautiful church, Old St. Paul's.

The flag you see hanging here belonged to the Marines who served in Wellington during WWII. Although we have fought together since those days in other countries, it was then that we stood together to defend *this* country from a common enemy.

Several weeks ago I was privileged to attend a service here at Old St. Paul's in honor of those Marines who were based in Wellington during World War II. One of them, Jimmy Duke, had returned here, along with his family.

Last time Mr. Duke was here, in 1999, he brought along 11 fellow Marines.

This time, he was alone.

It falls on all of us to remember the brave Marines who were here in those days, as one day their comrades will no longer be here to do so.

And it falls on all of us to work together to maintain the ties that they forged.

I'm happy to say that the New Zealand American Association (NZAA), which Rob Talbot chairs, tries to do just that. Every day.

And I'm also happy to say that, like me, they think one of the best ways to give thanks to our fallen soldiers and to remember the Marines that were here some 60 years ago is to reach out to the members of the military who are still standing proud, putting their lives on the line for their countries.

Last week, the NZAA decided to reach out to the 2nd Marine Division, the same division that served here in New Zealand during the war. NZAA members will write to Marines now serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, and explain the history that ties them together.

I think that those Marines will really appreciate that, more than the candies that will go along with the package.

And to convey our thanks and support to the young Kiwis who are now serving alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan, NZAA members, together with staff from my Embassy, will send similar messages to them.

I hope reaching out together in this way to members of our militaries will become a tradition for all of us. And I hope that we can all gather here in years ahead to commemorate Memorial Day together.